MOHAMED AL-FAYTOURI

Shrouded by the Branches of Night

POEMS

Translated, with a Preface,
by

M. Enani



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1997



Contemporary Arabic Literature

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Preface

Muhammad Al-Faytouri is a contemporary Arab poet, easily classified as belonging to the first generation of 'Arab modernists', the leaders being Salah Abdul-Saboor, Ahmad Abdul-Mu'ti Higazi, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Nazik Al-Mala'ikah, and Abdul-Wahhab Al-Bayyati. In the 'introduction' to my anthology of the new *Arabic Poetry in Egypt* (Cairo, 1986) I gave a brief account of the work of these modernists, tracing their roots in the revolutionary romantic 'Apollo School' of the 1930s, and showing their influence on the poets of 'the second wave', adequately represented, I believe, in that volume. As the 'anthology' dealt exclusively with Egyptian poets, the emphasis in that 'introduction' was on the first two of those 'leaders', though the others, all Iraqis, are worthy of no less critical interest. Al-Faytouri is Sudanese and is worthy in my opinion of much more critical attention than he has hitherto received. The present volume is his most recent, appearing in Arabic in 1997, and should be able to represent him fairly to the English reader, thus redressing

the imbalance in the present series. I have translated the complete published volume, together with the full text of his 'introduction', an essay entitled 'On the Crisis of Contemporary Poetry'.

I would have liked to deal at length with the verse of Al-Faytouri, being one of my favourite poets, but his own words should help the reader to know how this poet thinks and then, perhaps, to relate his poetry to his ideas, insofar as what the poet 'says' in prose has a bearing on what he 'does' in verse. As the 'essay' is primarily ideological, I would like the reader to concentrate on the verse and disregard the essay. However, I felt I had to include it, though only as an *Appendix*, because the poet seems to believe it is important, and as the 'ideas' implicit in the verse are given explicitly in it.

This translation follows the Arabic original rather closely, faithfully 'representing' the rhymes, rhythms and structures. The main problem has been, as always, one of interpretation : the nuances have seemed to me as important as the obvious 'sense' and I have tried hard to

transmit the connotations as well as the denotations, believing that I could make up for any loss in intensity (verse being the most intense form of expression) by giving as much meaning as I could possibly grasp.

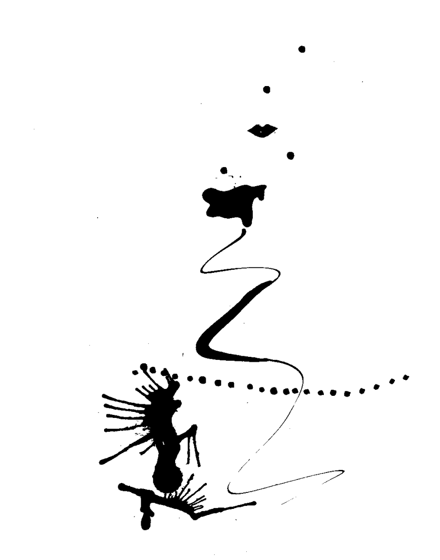
I have, however, kept any such interpretation down to a minimum. Arabic is such an ancient language, however, and some words may have connotations in the tradition which are bound to escape the modern reader. In principle, therefore, I assumed that the meaning *intended* was the one to be gleaned by the contemporary reader. Only when words seemed especially problematic did I resort to any exercise in 'cultural archeology' of the kind required for 'reconstructing' the old sense and any connotations that might be associated with it.

I hope I have not departed significantly from Al-Faytouri's "poetic meaning" and that the reader will enjoy the English version as much as I have enjoyed the Arabic.

M. Enani
Cairo, 1997

Dedication

Wherever you go you thunder;
Look how grows your anger !
Whether coming or going
You still breathe in terror
In those cities of brass
And that nation of wonder :
How handsome when sinning
How embellished the wastes are !



The Other Side of the River

Rather than taking shape as a body,
The tissues were soft, with bones of jelly,
Undulating within, dodging one another,
A torrent of ancient vapour,
A fount of visions in the air.

* * *

In the eyes of the dark,
There was nothing more than star dust
And holes in the sky.
I lived in the eyes of the dark,
Going into the resurrection of my spirit,
Staring in the marble of radiant tulips
In the solar chamber, wondering,
Dragging along the banner of my times
On the winter snows.

* * *

I never was assimilated
By those beings whose legs
Deep in the sand seeping,
Swam naked on the riverside.

*   *   *

It was there that I was surprised
By your mirrors,
A girl of hops and leaps;
I melted into the twilight of your mirrors,
And travelled far in memories,
To where death is mixed with magic,
Salt with fire, and grass with memories.
As lightning, in a flash of lightning,
I saw something flashing,
Like your face, storming my darknesses,
Deep, awesome and ablaze with radiance.
Oh, how slow had the evening been,
Absorbed in the evening clouds,

Before your wings beat about me !
You will not know
How such an evening had been,
What the crying had been like
Whenever the terraces of tears glowed
Just before you came !
You will not know how I wept, deserting
The land of the vast spaces within,
How the sun on my horizon hardened :
The sound of my verse was never
A carnation on my lips,
But rather a millstone resting on my neck;
I had been engaged in removing
The belts of oppression and death
From the age of oppression and death
Studding my dream with impossible
Images and laughs.
When the river of marble grey
Did flow about me
I could with my shadow play

In the foam of the waves,
Plant my songs on the banks
And dervish-like strut, alone,
In dervish deserts
Strutting in my words, and in my pride

Cairo, 1995

The Laughter Poem

Having stained the sea foam,
They now hide in peacock eyes.
So laugh as you now laugh,
Recline under petrified clouds,
'Tis time, night guard,
To penetrate the night jungle,
'Tis time for the image of your life
To release the fountains of laughter,
For your rituals to be stripped out
Revealing the laughter,
For the sacrifices at your life's altar
To change into laughter.

* * *

They now pick their grapes
In noontide darkness;
No cloud tresses now braid their colours

On the brow of day,
No birds plant their golden feathers
On the back of the waves.
They do not scratch the sky marble,
Or engrave the glass of fate,
Having turned into spiders, dead,
And statutes of boredom
Which turn around and open their mouths
Whenever the hurricanes played with them.
So laugh as you now laugh,
Laugh as you now laugh !

* * *

Carry about your waist
A divine crossbow and shoot
Your arrows towards the sun.
So laugh as you now laugh,
Laugh as you now laugh !

* * *

Put on the table of God
And memories
A violet of your tears
And laugh as you now laugh,
Laugh as you now laugh.

* * *

Put a star between your eyes,
Slough off the ugliness of your times,
And walk in beauty
To where the jewel of being shines
And laugh as you now laugh,
Laugh as you now laugh,
Laugh as you now laugh !

Cairo 5/5/1996

The Visitor and the Questions

You're a little late,
While she at the door did wait;
Have you now come with love
To resuscitate,
Or an apology for a missed date ?
The faces of lovers are too many,
The voices you hear do go astray
With the voices of those who are away;
Some have perished in exile,
Some have sipped our palm-tree wine,
And some, though sober all the while,
Were drunk on memories fine.
Others there were who,
If they recalled Lebanon,
Were drenched in the love of that country,
Knowing that love's victory
Is life's certain canon !
Some are today in oblivion,

Having been forced to depart;
But to foget they had no ready art !
You're late,
Were you abducted by the wind
And then hidden
Under the wing of the wind
For a journey unbidden ?

* * *

Now that in you the sun
Stands midway on the meridian,
While on the horizon
Shadows and images, too wan,
Flow with colours all hectic;
When the monstrous figures are all gone,
Mythologies violated on the ecliptic —
Are the ritual fires still burning
And the trees so high soaring ?
Are the larks the same old birds, burrowing

A track on the twilight advancing ?
Is verse the same old cup of love
Wherein we may dissolve
Some of the feelings broken within,
And we ourselves are then broken ?
Are people the same old crowd
Where anguish, on two feet walking,
Ends up falling like rain from a cloud ?

* * *

Now ask the Arabs, the genuine bunch,
About their fatherland :
Their words will abound
Though the meaning not so much !
Their death of spirit you readily touch,
But if in aversion
You touch the body,
You'll only see a strange dispersion !
Ask the times now whether

They live in the land
Or have their faces drowned
In a sea of sand ?
Are they already dead ?
Who was it that betrayed
The banners of struggle
Who was it that besieged
The heroes in battle ?
Do ask the mortal leaders how
With weakness eating through their marrow
They could forget their mortality,
The lonesomeness of the tomb of tyranny
Raised on a stone
Covered by a stone !

* * *

You may be asked about Lebanon
By the seashells and pearls and celestial dawn :
A bunch of poets it is, though each a king poet,

Who in crystalline Beirut did paint
Unfathered visions, both bright and faint;
And anarchists who, from one end
Of time to the farthest end,
Could neither wake nor sleep at night;
And lovers who, by beauty caught,
Innerly transmigrate
Into passions incarnate;
And dreamers, denying they ever were
In sunshine born, in rain or thunder
But believing in beauty's power !
The dreamer does scatter
A body dismembered into the universe,
And explode in another existence.

* * *

How Lebanon rose they ask,
With the Phoenician emerging
From his coffin yet burning;

Can they the right to life deny,
Or order life to be
Only where they decree ?
Belittling Lebanon, they only see
As far as the eye can see,
Not what the mind
May deep down find.
It is an ancient nation,
That held the key to civilization,
Passing from here to eternity,
With the water flower flowing in mystery
To crown both man and destiny.

* * *

Oh, do tell those who ask this question :
Indeed she can now harvest no corn,
But then the seeds our Lebanon had sown !
She may have had a star for a pillow,
Or ebbed for a time with the tide,

But in the spaces of the marrow,
The people spread their wings wide.
Their vision was once occluded,
The world was totally clouded,
With walls and curtains in darkness shrouded.
But from the day of sorrow, passed,
They now emerge unscathed —
With desires sprouting
And dreams flowing,
And even in death they ink the pages recording
The misdeeds of the culpable,
The violators of sanctities inviolable.

* * *

O Lebanon ! verse is the music of heaven,
The wine of a grapevine unseen,
If I had power I could've forgiven
All sins and given
A sincere apology unbidden,

I could've forgiven them
Who did you wrong !
Who sold their souls for a song,
Betraying all ere long;
I would have turned in,
With the rest of the throng,
Confined to the shell within,
Falling down, and like them, broken;
But signs of torment live
In the victims' faces riven —
How can they be forgiven ?

Beirut, 1993

The Times of Shimon Peres

No, the land is not the earth,
Nor the sky, grown so yellow, is the heavens !
You're not what you would be,
Or who you would be;
There's someone whose mirror cracked
In the night of sterility,
In whose garb the sun of death
Has fragrance, in whose sky
The clouds, the flowers and the light go dry.

* * *

There's someone who lives in his tattered laugh,
Turns into mercury, ablaze among
The galaxies, quenching with blood
The thirst of history.

* * *

There's someone who regards a fire party
As nothing more than war
(Sweeping over both women and children
As it comes down despicably).

* * *

There's someone drowning
In his own difficult times, sinking,
Carrying the ashes of a homeland,
Without the decorations of victory,
Or honest men's purity.

* * *

There's someone who rises from the calendar
Of the past, to join the calendar
Of our age, as though from the grave
Now rises an elegy.

* * *

There's a nation which suddenly
Unbuttons her coat,
And a killer who on the cedars
Imprints his shrapnels,
And on the hills of Lebanon
The faces of martyrs.

Cairo, 1995



Shrouded by the Branches of Night

Such golden rains are coming down,
On spires and domes in the jungles of the sun;
The bolting steeds gather round
Under the neighing of the wind;
In the trees of days are some of your leaves,
And a wall now heaves,
Of embracing crosses, and the candles on a tomb.
So go now, both blood and legend, into exile.
Do not in vain draw down
The blinds on your eyes :
Rather turn your dream,
When the world goes to sleep,
Into a chariot of melodies and perfumes;
Take your heart out of that which
Is taking up your heart,
As a prophet at the moment
Of being lit up by history;
Embody yourself in the vision of humanity

As a blue jewel, and a circle of light !
Take shape in the names,
In the sounds and the colours :
With black wilting away
Feverishly into white,
And the red rubies drowning
In the yellow sapphires.
(The two opposites reclining
On the stone of eternity,
Are now joined but split apart;
They roll down and crash
But are levelled again !)

* * *

But there, within,
Behind the solid, opaque and guarded gates
Around the laws of the world,
Is the handsome tragedy of the world;
The sky of the All-Great God

Is behind the gates clouded;
The sun is dying and
The children of darkness are born.
That is why the dead will embrace
Their curse for ever
And fight one another !

* * *

If the jungle man, hurrying,
Mounted on the horses of time,
Through his wild gardens,
Could know the meaning of the time to come,
He would be shocked and destroyed,
He would see his royal helmet drowned
In the river of death.

* * *

Some words and some gestures
Have been treacherous;
But now, swaying and quivering,
Shrouded by the branches of night,
Having lost your way and become friendless —
Oh, what madness !
Where could you hang up the picture of your poetry
In the age of false glory !

Cairo, 1996

For the departed jewel
of Tunisia, my friend
Saleh Jagham



Resplendent in Death

As my spirit bent down,
With you lying in state,
I looked long at your face,
Moulded of the flower of Tunisian joy,
Of the jasmine of radiance and melancholy.
I set about embracing my death in you,
Listening long to the voice of memory,
With a mountain of tears submerged in me.

* * *

May God help me, my friend,
How could I believe that you,
A dream embodied,
Now self-consumed,
Did go beyond the 'beyond' ?

* * *

How could I believe that you,
Once a light on a balcony,
Saw the sun relinquish his throne,
And regain his elements in the evening ?
What, if questioned, could I say in reply ?
How should I read my verse if written ?
How could I meet you yet one day,
When I have lost you
In the 'unmeeting' multitude ?

* * *

As my verse bent down over you,
I put on the cloak of my age's gloom;
I came to look for you,
Though now separated
By a wedding party of painful laughs,
And a table set on the ashes of defeat.
O friend and brother !
Judges are golden hawks,

Justice is a beauty asleep
In the bed of crime !
O friend and brother !
Neither in life nor in death
Did we raise a banner of death,
Our glory was never a moon falling
On a barren earth;
We were not the nation they claimed;
Why then were we shocked by the stars
And in our soul the age darkened ?
We lived in the ability of the able,
In the disability of the unable,,
Both in those who stood up
And in those who fell down, kneeling,
Our papers round their necks hung
And their disasters on their lips sung !
We never were the nation they claimed,
O my friend and brother !

* * *

From my attachment to you
An ear of corn was sprung
From your departure into the others
A willow tree sprouted;
Tell me then, now resplendent in death,
How could the swaying green willow
Turn blue in the dead
How can the tears turn into water
When they fall from the eyes ?*
How can blood turn into dust
When they fall down from the eyes ?

* * *

On the horizon of admissibility
And of inadmissibility,
When to speak is to be extinguished,
When the wind of departure gallops in people,
I find myself permeated
By a wave of your symbols until departure;

I then erect the castle of my sorrow,
Make fire in a chimney of my bones,
And embrace those who haunt my body,
Waiting for the homecoming.
Oh why do you live in your funerals
Turning your backs on me ?
Give your bodies, for once, a rest,
O friends ! Dismount !
In the heart's ease there's a table laid for all,
In life's anxiety there's a space
For the sweetest nights.
O master death, here am I,
Under the rays of your sun,
Absorbed in my mental journey,
And here am I, in your strange mystery,
Hiding from my existence,
Floating in your virtues,
With the door ahead locked.
O master ! Alone in the dome of the unseen,

O master of the tyrannical lonesomeness,

The infinite dust of alienation,

O master,

O master !

Rabat and Tunis 1991

A moment of reverence
at the tomb of Ali, Al-
Najaf Al-Ashraf, Iraq



Preamble to the Visit

As I stood, my shoulder sun-ridden,
And the banner of poetry
In my eye unhidden,
A storm swept through history,
Turning every creature seen,
Into a lonesome dummy
Or a monster of porcelain !
Witches were now sifting the space
With death transmigrating
Into ghosts and sperms;
The human waves dancing
On the fires of the times
Heaved on the vast shoreline !

To you I had run in my dream
With desire and passion extreme,
For my journey within you could
Become part of my blood,

By the palm leaves coloured
By the water regenerated,
To quench the thirst of the bones
Whose primal sources had dried,
To breathe the spirit of God
Into bodies now dead and buried.

* * *

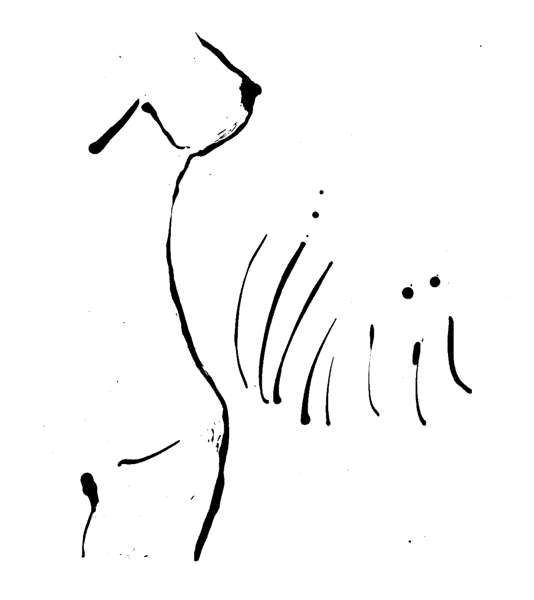
O masterful presence !
O part of the circumference
Of a circle of prophecy
Never interrupted !
It was then, as listening I stood,
Seeping into all existence,
Having been turned into a liquid
In my embrace
With the rocks and sea shells,
That I thought I might see you !
Oh, I knew full well that your position

On the scale of the mystery ascension
Was a secret only grandeur could spell !
And yet, I thought, your vision might
Surprise me in my solitary cell,
With my solitary candle burning still !
I then allowed myself
Thus to address my 'self',
In a voice broken and uncertain :
Why unquiet my soul, why complain,
With a head hanging down in fear ?
O soul ! fear not ! you're here
In Iraq, with the Prince of the faithful !
This is the land of Ali who's here in Najaf !
How oft an enemy with dreams of usurpation
Could harvest nought but destruction
This is the Iraq of men whose dignity
Is from the soul sprung
Not from oil fields and luxury !
This is the Iraq of the ancestors
Whose hand inscribed the law of God
On the stones and the scriptures !

Around them gathered a world —
A wall of fire and crosses, of arrogance and blood,
Seeking Baghdad's head
But never a single head could bend :
The stature of honour rose higher instead !
Now woven by a cloud across a cloud
Into flashes of lightning, I said,
While tears of anguish were shed,
How strangely absent
Are some of those present
Under these very domes !
There's one who raises a complaint
With a soul unveiled, so faint;
Another at worship, prostrated,
With hands trembling, agitated;
Embers in his eyes burn
Glowing and fading in turn;
There's a third who, absorbed in
The presence of communion,
Looks more like a shadow

Of that shadow of an age so distant !
How dear one's country was to one, I said,
Even if siege one's hands crippled !
The siege is nought to the proud !
How sweet was one's country to one
Even if a livelihood was painfully won
And the tears of hardship were forced to run !
Now proceed on the road of destiny,
True to your history,
In mad defiance of your foe,
And do be true,
But recite a greeting of peace
If indeed comes peace to the home of peace,
Then kiss the land and go !

Al-Najaf, Iraq 1996



A Face in the Mirror

Just as he came in the beginning,
The old man of the radiant clouds
Walks into the chamber of his days, and goes.
You rise, glowing white in your ashes,
With your face a mirror
Of the celestial ceiling,
Your sun the colours of sapphire,
And your mountains gods of marble.

* * *

You return through the rituals of suffering
In the lust of creation and death
In the tremor of a genius pain
In the *angst* of verse and the great dreamers.

* * *

Make me then a vagrant
In the uncharted realms of your perfume
Or pour some of your magic
Into my endless thirst !
I am but defeated cities,
And skeletons supported by the staff of my years.

* * *

The fire, the clouds and the petrified sloth
Are becalmed behind the white of the eyes.
I denied that I existed in the fire,
The clouds and the petrified sloth;
I emptied my death of myself,
And hid my sorrow in my prayers,
And became my self the sun,
Weaving on the olden times my clouds,
Coming down as rain in my words.
Love may one day rise on my horizon
To live in my kingdom;

Then I would go back alone to my memories,
And look for the verse of gold
Under the verbal sand.

Cairo, 1996



In a Cruel, Cold Winter

Noisy and cruel is your singing,
The eyes with tears are brimming;
Like a starfish haunted
By the weedy waves surging,
Or the sun aflame, undaunted,
Though there on the rocks is setting !
Wherever you go you thunder
Look how grows your anger,
Whether coming or going
You still breathe in terror,
In those cities of brass,
And that nation of wonder !
How handsome when sinning,
How embellished the wastes are !
Their pain is excruciating
But they know not whether
The whip is near or far !

Asleep they are on beds of stupor,
Though there no dreams may come !

* * *

Cruel is your winter,
A sandy terrain, and storms blowing;
But a single twig of fire
Stands, death-like, listening.
Soon it was bent down,
Burdened by a distant vision
Of kings of Arab sects Andalusian,
All in red cloaks emerging
From the depth of memory !
They had been the world entire,
High in state, in valiance and in luxury,
Though now hid in museum-coffin attire !
How did they unwinking
Trample their tombs, unthinking ?
How did they knowingly

Their homeland betray ?
How dare the fingers of adulterers
Touch the undefiled Muslim scriptures ?

* * *

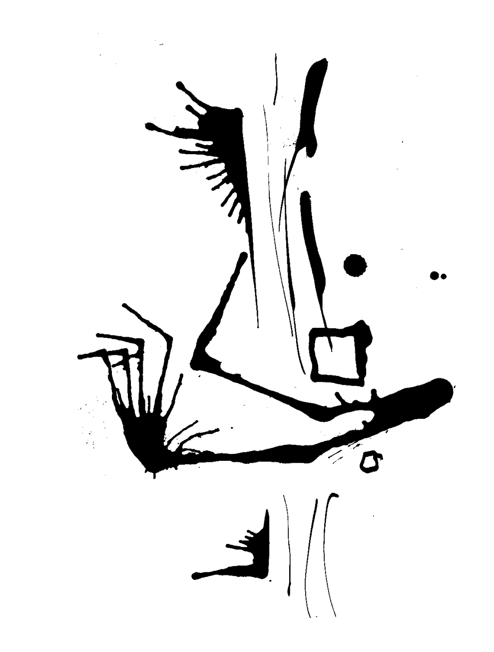
So cruel ! Your voice and the lightning
All play in the seagulls' eyes,
But the crowds, lined up, watching
Are only dolls and dummies !
Oh, it has been a slow winter,
Severely cold and bitter;
'O times of oil', I said then,
'O times of spinster males, do listen !
'That wedding party where they
'Did dance with such intricacy
'Was not a wedding at all !
'But if it was, then a wedding of conspiracy !'

* * *

So cruel ! but Baghdad is more so !
Baghdad's range is unending,
As her eyes and brows flow
Into galaxies extending !
The outer limit is, though,
Where history follows in awe !
So write of fire and snow,
Her sun and forenoon glow !
Write and touch the bones
Of the martyrs you know,
For you are the minstrel
Who, then, did see them go !
Who saw our age naked,
In her blood inferno !

Baghdad, 1994

To the Spirit of Bisharah Al-Khouri, the eminent Arab Lebanese Poet



Belonging

'Coming, indeed !' I say :
How can I not obey your call ?
When to your heavenly poetry
I do belong and owe it all !
I was made of the special clay
You wield in your shaping hand —
Arab, human and a divine legacy !
I came after you to a fire-baptized land
Glowing with glory and fury !
Choked am I with verse and mystery,
Pouring to the people my melody,
Myself being poured !
As though you'd given me a family
Of stars in Lebanon, singing
Even as they burned !
As though in your vast world
I had been into embers transformed
Wherein fragrance, magic and gold
Perpetually undulated !

As though one of your testaments,
Exalted in my eye,
Was that exalted love
Was only the love one gave !
Crucified by the extending horizon high
Over the domes, both far and nigh,
I said, 'let death be my home !',
Finding no home in wave, cloud or storm !
'O vile sectarian', I said to the night,
'I still have a poem to recite !'
And the curtains were swept aside !
I said to the poets whose humour
Is eternally overcast,
With no spell of fair weather,
No soul-quiver or rocking tremor :
'Sing in death's choir !
'Be at the funeral pyre !
'Get warm in the elegies' fire !'
To the sun in his dire eruption I said :
'You'll go and leave the flame in my blood !'
No sooner had I called

On an old love now gone
Than I was there undone,
My life in weariness consumed.
I said 'enough' to Lebanon,
And the cities were shaken,
And the meteors in the dark
To me turned round !
'We've both had enough, O Lebanon !
'Of the legacy of the dead,
'Of banners of primitive men,
'And all those domes !
'We've surely learnt a lesson
'Seeing that the fire running
'In the field has not distinguished
'Between the flowers and fire-wood !
'The victors were like the vanquished
'And the vanquished like the victors !'

Summer Harvest

What a celestial country !
What an embellished tragedy
And trumpets of victory !
There are swords and banners
In the hands of formidable worriors
Whose eyebrows' hair, like the Tartars,
Is thick and braided !
There are gold incense burners
And the ashes of dying fires !
There are battles raging
With clouds of dust trailing the victors,
And kingdoms glittering,
With peacock vanity in emblem feathers !

* * *

In the wastes of history
One turns vertiginous

The defeats multitudinous
Could anyone crucify !
You almost laugh at the ignominy,
Or die in shame !
Are these the old high emperors
Dug out of memory ?
Or are the ones I mean
Gone in reality ?
Have the celestial spheres
Now turned full circle ?
O waves ! the language
Of earthquakes, storm and sea powers !
O rose of sponge
The bride of flowers !
What can the harvest be
Of one summer
'Rushing after another ?
What can the harvest be of the desert
When the sand storm has subsided,
With all the grey dust clouds raised ?
What can the stream of identical days

Following one another, yield
Except obliteration ?
What can the fall of those who fell
On the tiles of their faces yield,
Except ugliness and destruction ?

Tripoli, 1992

Appendix

On the crisis in contemporary poetry

by

Mohammad Al-Faytouri

If it is agreed that there is a crisis, which is precisely the case, it will only be natural that any attempt to assess it should necessarily explore its dimensions and identify its components. To do this one must examine the intricate web of inter-relationships from which it derives and from which it infiltrates into the rank and file of society.

Let me admit at the outset that I subscribe to the view that there is a dynamic dialectic between the two poles of the existential phenomenon – life and death – and the two parties to the creative phenomenon : man and nature.

Rhetorical formulae, rhythms and novel experiments with form do not alone create the emotional life of a given nation and consequently shape an artist's consciousness. These must be coupled by the picture of social reality and

its inevitable reflections. It may be possible, therefore, to reassemble the units or particles of such an assumed picture, and, of course, reframe it. A possible starting point would be the end of the second world war (1945); the 'store' of that date has been mounting by the series of frustrations and defeats accumulating therein. Some of these may easily be enumerated :

* The defeat of the Arab states in 1948 in their first war with the Zionist gangs. This occurred after the UN partition resolution. It was this defeat that led to the establishment of that alien state, and the perpetuation of its legitimacy. It thereafter tighted its grip on the rest of the Palestinian territories.
* The decline and fall of the ruling bourgeois entities which had historically borne the brunt of the struggle during the phase of national liberation. They had to admit their failure to face the challenges posed in the ensuing period.
* The growing phenomenon of military *coups d'etat,* sweeping away the national democracies in many third

world countries, at the forefront of which are the countries of the Arab world.

* The fragility of the alternative emerging military regimes. They have fallen victim to the helplessness of the old regimes. They have been inward-looking, seeking only to serve their own interests and enjoy their own privileges, never living up to the promises they made and the slogans they presented to the masses as pretexts for taking over power. Here are very briefly some of the commitments made by those regimes :

Firstly : To remove the surviving traces of the prolonged colonial period. It was the colonial rulers that resorted to oppression, quite consciously, to frustrate the will of the masses. They enslaved the masses, by maintaining the high historical barrier of illiteracy, as well as moral and material impoverishment and by claiming to create alternative, though false climates.

Secondly : Support for the will of the Palestinian people, to the extent of forcing the enemy to accept it, and the liberation of the stolen land.

Thirdly : Strengthening the bases of national economies, expanding national sovereignty, and safeguarding independence.

Fourthly : The realization of the principles of freedom and social justice, in deed not in word, and regarding human rights as sacred.

Fifthly : The opening up of the horizons of human knowledge, so as to enable the modern Arab mind to develop and effectively participate in the scientific and cultural achievements of our time.

Sixthly : To gradually work for the removal of inequalities and distinctions between all social classes and group, as a prelude to the adoption of genuine pan-Arab policies, seeking to transcend the phase of oppression and social backwardness.

This is a list of the most important and prominent commitments and promises made by the military regimes. In fact none of these has been fulfilled. I daresay a massive destruction, both human and economic, has

affected the potentials and capacities of that period, and that a high price of blood has been paid for nothing.

I am, however, confident, that the Ottoman/Mameluki picture of the historical Arab world has remained. It persists, unchanged if not grown more monstrous. It reflects the features of the great crisis, casting its dark shadows on the intellectual, artistic and cultural life in general. It constitutes the main source of inspiration for the spirit and données of the modern Arab poet. It also provides an objective explanation of the dimensions of the suffering of this generation, and the reasons for the fall of its symbols in the vicious circle of obfuscation, superficiality and mechanical responses.

It is therefore the crisis of a nation, rather than a creative crisis. It is a crisis of civilization, rather than one of a poetic trend. This is, I believe, why it is, contrary to the dreams of a few, so difficult to overcome. Mine is not the testimony of a spectator or a passer-by.

The mills of modern Arabic poetry — triangular, right–angled, irregularly shaped, and empty — will continue to turn, and to make loud noises indeed. There will be a repetition of the same old absurd and defeatist modes, the same formal experiments, and the same images, words and structures, unless the vision and capacities of the contemporary Arabic poet are illumined with knowledge and reinforced by profound optimism. So emaciated has this poet become, he must be regarded as proof that there is a crime of one sort or another.

Such an 'unknown prophet' should realize, therefore, that there can be no salvation for him unless his nation is saved from backwardness; that there can be no 'cause' for him beyond the 'causes' of his reality and society – both invited to attend the historic celebration of the triumph of the freedom of thought, the defeat of oppression, and the re-instatement of human dignity.

* * *

Arabic poetry has been losing, since the turn of the century, its 'most favoured' position in the hearts of its traditional readership. The process began when the poet came to accept, whatever the motives for such acceptance, the logic of the 'requirements' of the age. It was this that caused his alienation from the real preoccupations of people and society.

What is needed is, rather, a break with the holistic critical view of the tradition of Arabic poetry as a huge cumulative mass or at best, as a museum full to the brim with names, dates and stereotypical texts, covering two thousand years or more of the life of the Arab nation. It is essential to abandon such an absurd view. One should rather begin to deal with that tradition with a new consciousness and a new feeling. Both should help to reveal the originality of the creative poetic effort, even when the old poet wrote panegyries, love poems, satires, elegies, mystically-passionate verse or general meditations. It must be recognized that he was, in fact, making an active and effective contribution to the life of

his nation, helping her 'character' to reach maturity, to recognize the meaning of her existence, relations with God and the world in which she lived, and her uninterrupted progress into the depths of the future.

* * *

Then came the great world-wide cultural changes, the greatest that man ever witnessed, with the late mid-century : the Arab poet fell into the trap.

I do not like to seek excuses for the Arab poet. One excuse is that there is a cultural hegemony, and that each hegemony has its imperatives, in terms of conditions and rules of play. In the final analysis, therefore, the Arab poet would be perceived as an innocent victim, a helpless plaything in the hands of ruthless circumstances 'not to be withstood'.

I have said I do not favour the practice of seeking excuses. However, actual reality has its own logic, and it suggests that there is, in effect, a cultural hegemony of one

kind or another. By this I do not mean the prevalence of modern science and industrial technologies which, central to contemporary civilization, have for almost a century controlled the destiny of the world — this region being no exception. Nor do I have in mind the cultural incursions by Eastern Europe, by Western Europe, by the prevalent U.S. ethos, the emerging Asian model, or, more recently by Hebrew Zionism preparing for the onslaught. What I do have in mind is the dominance of the 'oil' mentality — the desert / Arabian mentality.

My meaning is, in effect, that the Arab poet is being influenced by two negative forces, both due to his historical legacy, namely the 'sand culture' and the 'oil culture', both pulling at him, and both making him produce amorphous verse by which his readership is ultimately influenced.

The Arab poet is self-encapsulated, and he places himself higher than and apart from the others. He distances himself from everybody, even as he believes he is drawing

closer, and in his isolation grows bigger, imagining that he grows by acquiring the dimensions of all others !

Let me recount two incidents not so much to absolve the poet but rather to absolve the reader.

One evening an Arab poet espousing a contemporary cause was invited to recite some of his verses to a huge audience in an Arab city. He did, and the response was vast and profound. Honours were conferred on him, and he was carried shoulder-high !

The audience was entranced. After the recitation, each member of the audience felt as though he had washed away a sin, as though he had unburdened himself of a certain sense of guilt. Gratification appeared on the face of the poet, and the audience felt satisfied.

In the same Arab city, and on a similar occasion, stood an eminent poet from a distant Arab country to recite some of his verses. Turning round, he suddenly realized that the vast hall was nearly empty. What audience was there felt almost embarrassed.

The poet closed his eyes, recited some of his verse, then said to the audience :

> "Only now have I come to realize my own worth. I should be humbler than this. The audiences in my country had given me a different feeling which I today miss."

No one knew what the poet wanted to say. Personally I believe that the first thought that his large audience had come to receive a message, not least out of the recognition that they had failed their responsibility towards the continuing tragedy of the people. The other poet learnt, however, that an audience was not always drawn because there was poetry but rather because the poetry espoused a cause.

I feel it is my duty, finally, to explain that the phenomenon does not in itself mean much to me, whatever the noises made about it : what concerns me is the verse as a serious work of art, as basic thought, and as an aesthetic dialogue between the poet and the audience.

It also concerns me as a human contribution and a creative, revolutionary vision. In the light of this, a contemporary poet may adopt whatever modern aesthetic modes and styles that may be available to him as a result of the social transformations taking place in the Arab homeland and the world at large. But to 'adopt' or seek is not enough : what is required is creative practice and profound contribution capable of illuminating and enriching the emotional life of the Arabs at this difficult phase — this phase in particular.

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